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ABSTRACT

Reading Old English poses many problems for a beginning student. Even though it has some similarities to modern English, the special characters, obsolete words, inflected grammar, and alien word order of Old English makes it difficult for Old English neophytes to reconstruct the propositional content in a poem such as "Beowulf." Experts at Old English are able to comprehend an entire situation at a single glance, while novices must struggle through various uncertainties about function words, pronoun usage, word order, and punctuation. Schemata evolved to deal with modern English also interfere with efficient processing. Separation of words and phrases from the words or phrases they modify or refer to causes information and short term memory overload. Attacking "Beowulf" as a beginning reader means paying too much attention to visual information, suffering from too many uncertainties, and not having enough nonvisual information. Still, a beginning reader can become a good processor of Old English, given time and the correct strategies. (JL)

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Processing Experiences With Three Beowulf Passages in Old English: Difficulties and Strategies

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Processing written material is usually not a problem for me. On the Nelson-Denny Reading Test, Form B, taken two years ago, I had a total raw score of 155 for vocabulary and comprehension, which is a 99 percentile rank and a reading rate of 600+ words per minute. Apparently I had the skill to select the fewest, most productive cues necessary to produce guesses which were right the first time and was doing the anticipating, dipping, and selecting that Kenneth Goodman says the efficient reader does, using graphic, syntactic, and semantic information simultaneously. According to Goodman, redundancy and sequential constraints in language (which skilled readers react to), make the predictions of what's coming and the sampling to cue more semantic and syntactic information possible. I did this efficient processing on the Nelson-Denny test on a variety of expository moderate-tension passages written by contemporary writers with different styles; these styles helped and in no way hindered my processing.

The style of the various eighth to tenth century scops and the later author of "The Old English Epic," the poem Beowulf, however, hindered and in few ways helped my processing when I read the poem in Old English. This poem was a different experience for me. The English speaking person who attempts to read one of the Old English/Anglo-Saxon poems by literally translating it feels at first that he is puzzling over an uncouth foreign tongue, until suddenly he says, "Why, this word is English, spelled a little differently;" or, "This word is English, with a little change of meaning," and soon he feels that he is dealing with far-off kindred. Modern English is the ancient English, transformed, but not superseded. Even though it has some similarities to Modern English, Old English causes many processing problems to a beginning student trying to understand, to

extract meaning from a translating assignment. There are many sources of these processing problems, and some problems are more serious than others. There is, of course, the special Anglo-Saxon characters called thorn p (poem) and edh (wi); ach character represents a th sound. There is also a great number of obsolete words, compelling him to use a special dictionary for Beowulf's vocabulary: ides = lady; freo-drihten = noble lord; swa = as; gemyndic = remembering; onfon = accept; wes = be. Next, he becomes aware of a still more serious difficulty, the grammar. Anglo-Saxon or Old English was an inflected language, doing by change in forms of words what English does by prepositions, etc., so he must insert prepositions, pronouns, and other function words in parentheses in order to fill out the meaning.

cwen Hroðgares (the) queen (of) Hrothgar grette. gold-hroden (the) gold-adorned (one)

Eode (Wealthpēow) forð, (then) Wealtheow came forward, cynna gemyndig; mindful (of) courtesies; guman on healle, greeted (the) men in (the) hall,

Besides these processing problems is the one called word order, the one that causes at times an almost word-by-word reading, one that requires a problem-solving technique, a searching for logical subjects and objects, for main verbs, for antecedents or pronouns, for coreferents, for the second half of a compound, for subordinate and coordinate conjunctions, for separated adjectives, participials, and adverbs, and for strayed appositives. All of these add to the complications for Old English neophytes in the reconstructing of propositional content in a poem such as Beowulf.

What I intend to do, then, in this brief paper is to specify some of the adjustments I as a reader had to make to get at the sentence structure

and the coping strategies I had to use with some of the constructions as types, and to describe some of the sources of my processing difficulties.

The reason I read the Beowulf assignment in Old English was to comprehend the passages, to make sense of the text. Frank Smith, in his analysis of reading, says that comprehension can be regarded as the reduction of the reader's uncertainty. I discovered I needed to reduce a great amount of uncertainty when I looked at the written text, a lot of inkmarks on a page, variously characterized as visual information, distinctive features or surface structure. Whatever a reader perceives in text--letters, words, or meanings--depends upon the prior knowledge (non-visual information) that he happens to bring and the implicit questions he happens to be asking. The actual information that a reader finds or seeks in the text depends upon his original uncertainty. The amount of visual information required to identify each letter or word goes down as the number of alternatives that the letter or word might be (the reader's uncertainty) is reduced. The fewer the alternatives, the faster or easier a letter or word is identified because fewer distinctive features need to be discriminated for a decision to be made. Prediction, based on prior knowledge, eliminates unlikely alternatives in advance.

Similarly, the more a reader knows about the way words go together in a grammatical and meaningful phrase--because of the reader's prior knowledge of the particular language and of the topic being discussed--the less visual information is required. Because I didn't know enough about the way Old English words go together in grammatical and meaningful phrases and because I also had little prior knowledge of the content of Beowulf and the particular poetic conventions it had, such as diction, metrical formulas,

kennings, the lexicon, the heavy nominalism, the variation, the litates, general style, narrative technique and the syntax, I needed more visual information than usual. This resulted in inefficient reading, for efficient reading depends on being fast, being selective, sampling the text, and depending on non-visual information. Experts in Old English are able to comprehend an entire situation at a single glance while the greater uncertainty of novices (such as I), handicaps them with tunnel vision.

One of my biggest uncertainties in translating Beowulf concerned function words, those words that make the machinery of an Old English sentence, clause, or poem line work. In the passages I chose, lines 612-671 and lines 1168-1187, I found only one or two lines where the author used articles. In line 647 I found þæm heah-sele which could have been the high hall. I was uncertain, but decided it was the article since the hall had been mentioned in line 638 and was old information. The author used the definite article once but did not in 19 other situations in the passages.

I soon expected to insert the definite article myself when I began reading lines 610+:

613 - the queen
614 - the hall
615 - the noble woman
619 - the hall-cup

Although I was confused about the given articles in line 627, se willa, and line 647, I soon began to stop searching for and expecting definite articles. I wondered at the few indefinite articles, however. I counted only one spot where the indefinite was certain--Line 667--a hall-guard against Grendel, introducing new information, and several places where it was uncertain--Line 637--could read some heroic deeds but more probably is a heroic deed

according to context. Beowulf no doubt meant to do one heroic deed, slaying Grendel, that night since that was his primary purpose in coming there.

Articles were not too much of a problem--I learned to insert them where needed, and the author was very consistent in not using them, but pronouns were a problem because of the inconsistency of the author in using the lexical items. I found 15 instances of where I needed to supply a possessive pronoun for meaning and 7 instances of where the author supplied the form.

Author Given	Reader Given
Line 624 - her wish	Line 614 - her gold
Line 638 - my last day	Line 618 - his people
Line 641 - her lord	Line 625 - her words
Line 662 - his troop	Line 632 - our ship
Line 1169 - my noble lord	Line 640 - her gown
Line 1178 - your sons	Line 645 - his nights
Line 1185 - our sons	Line 660 - your foe
	Line 664 - his queen
	Line 669 - his own power
	Line 1173 - your gentle words
	Line 1175 - your son
	Line 1178 - your gifts
	Line 1186 - his favors
	Line 1186 - his pleasures
	Line 1187 - his honor

The same inconsistencies and uncertainties were true for demonstrative pro forms, for subject forms, and for object forms.

1. Author Given	Reader Given
Line 618 - this mead serving	
Line 635 -	in this matter
Line 638 - this mead hall	
Line 639 - these/this words/speech	
Line 654 - these/this words/speech	
Line 657 -	this best house
Line 662 - that deed of valor	
Line 1169 - this cup	
Line 1176 -	this bright hall
Line 1184 -	this world

Demonstrative Pro Forms

2.	Author Given	Reader Given
Line	614 -	she greeted
Line	617 -	she bade
Line	618 - he took	she offered
Line	621 - she might expect	
Line	623 - she came	
Line	625 -	she greeted, she thanked
Line	628 - he accepted	
Line	630 -	he made
Line	632 - I sent out, I would	
	to - fill, I will do, I	
Line	636 - will serve	
Line	640 -	she went
Line	646 -	she knew
Line	648 - it, the dawn	
Line	652 -	he greeted
Line	653 -	he wished
Line	654 -	he spoke
Line	656 - I could lift	
Line	657 - I entrusted	
Line	658 - (you) hold, (you) guard,	
	to - (you) show	
Line	660 -	
Line	665 -	he did, he kept
Line	1180 - I know	
Line	1181 - he would rule	
Line	1182 - he gives up	
Line	1184 - I know, he recalls	

Subjective Pronouns

3.	Author Given	Reader Given
Line	618 - bade him rejoice	
Line	524 -	gave him control, brought him
Line	648 -	took it
Line	654 -	cover them all
Line	653 - wished him	
Line	662 -	greeted him
Line	1175 - from him, to me	

Objective Pronouns

It appears that the author supplies demonstratives about 50% of the time, that he supplies subject forms about 60% of the time, and object forms about 45% of the time.

I had other pronoun processing complications, also. Is the pa in Line 620 an adverb or a demonstrative pro form or a definite article? Then the lady passed or that lady passed or the lady passed? Do I need to insert an object pronoun for he took it in Line 618, which then gives an appositive: he took it, the hall-cup or do I just translate, he took the hall-cup. Which reading does the Old English poem require? Probably the appositive version, since it would be characteristic of Old English poetry. In Line 614 do I need a replacive "one" pro form: the gold-adorned one greeted the men in the hall, or do I read she, gold-adorned, greeted the men, or, attired in her gold, she greeted the men? Do I need a him in Line 654 for parallel structure? Hrothgar wished him luck, gave him control of the wine-hall, and spoke to him these words. In Line 617 is paere this mead-serving or the mead-serving? Is it brought Beowulf the mead or brought him the mead in Line 624 - did she come to Beowulf and bring to him the mead? Do I need to use two verbs, came and brought? Or only one verb?

A "garden path" confronted me as I attempted to translate Line 626b beginning with paesbe. This construction usually means as, or since: since her wish came to pass or had befallen--she thank God since her wish came to pass--and that sounds logical. But, the construction can also make sense translated, she thanked God (for the fact) that her wish had come to pass. Here it is not an adverbial but a 'that' clause acting as a prepositional complement. After trying the sentence both ways and looking ahead to the next 'that' clause, I decided it must be that and not since: she thanked God that her wish had come to pass that she in any warrior might trust. The second 'that' clause acts as a relative pronoun referring

to wish. But why are the two words spelled differently? Why not paet for both words, eliminating my uncertainty and the garden path? When I determined that Line 635 meant . . . that I would wholly accomplish the will of your people, I wanted to go on and add--in this matter--the will of your people in this matter, to make more sense to me, so I did, becoming an active participant in the comprehension process. That in Line 632 also puzzled me as well as that in Line 634. "Is paet and paet ic. Why this difference? Why two thats? Is it, "I resolved, that when I went out to sea with my warrior band and sat in the seaboat, that I would wholly accomplish . . ." Or is something else going on here? In Line 639 I'm facing alternatives again--is pa an adverb, then, a conjunction when, or a demonstrative pronoun? Is it then the speech/words well pleased that lady or is it these words well pleased or is it the speech or this speech? The number of alternates caused me to attend too much to the visual information, a fact that reduces my processing efficiency. Ambiguity also reduced my efficiency in processing Line 667--he did special service for the lord of Danes (or) held a special office. Who does he refer to? The antecedent is unclear. It could refer to the closest male animate noun to the left, the indefinite a hall-guard or it could refer to Beowulf, mentioned earlier in context. Beowulf could be the hall-guard appointed by Hrothgar, too. Which possible candidate is it? Is it the Geatish man mentioned in Line 669? Should I use anaphoric scanning or cataphoric scanning to find the noun phrase equivalent for he? The ambiguity resulted in readability difficulties.

Another stylistic characteristic of Beowulf's author, a deviation from the norm for me, was his sentence-initial use of me, which is a rearrangement

of word order for me and an information load problem for my processing. I needed to hold in my short-term memory the word me and the knowledge it could be either dative or accusative case while I searched for a verb to attach it to. I finally found it, only two words away, men have told me, or men have said to me that . . . The short-term memory holding was not a serious problem here, but it did cause me to slow down my processing and so caused some inefficiency.

Based on my past experience, I brought a number of schemata about pronouns to these lines in the two passages. I had certain expectations about authors being consistent in explicitly or implicitly using pronouns, and about the number of alternatives possible for a pro form, about the location of a pro form, and about the cooperation of an author in not presenting ambiguous pronouns. My schemata, my nonvisual information expectations affected my processing. I also had certain expectations about punctuation. When I read Line 630a, I needed punctuation at the end, after gyddode to set off a deleted clause boundary. I was not sure whether I wanted a comma or a period or a semicolon. If I chose the comma after line a, and then made a speech would be followed by an adjective phrase, eager for battle, which would be separated from the noun phrase it modified. The noun phrase is the sentence-initial pronoun He, referring to Beowulf. He the fierce warrior, eager for battle, took the cup from Wealtheow's hand and then made a speech. If I decided to put an end mark after speech, I would shift eager for bottle to a sentence-initial position causing it to be a pre-position modifer for Beowulf: Eager for battle, Beowulf spoke, . . . Whether it should be pre-position or post-position I couldn't determine, for either one makes sense in the context, but having no punctuation at all after speech makes no sense at all. The same situation

exists in Line 618 with the adjective phrase beloved by his people, in that it could be post-positioned for East-Dane's country's guardian (Hrothgar) in Line 616a or be pre-positioned for he in Line 618b (Hrothgar). Beloved by his people, he gladly partook of the feast . . . After analyzing the passages, I came to the conclusion that it must be conventional for Old English poets to use separated adjective phrases post-positionally, so the semi-colon would be in order or a period; but it also would sound sensible with a comma after speech.

Another punctuation alternative problem appeared in Line 1172a with the comma after wordum. Maybe it should be a comma and read, and give to the Geats your kind words, as is proper for men; but the line could also read: and speak to the Geats with gentle words. So man shall do. I decided that the second reading sounded Anglo-Saxon, so I chose the end mark rather than the comma. So man shall/must do sounds more active, lively and gnomic, which fits my schemata for the Anglo-Saxon personality.

Punctuation uncertainties, like function word uncertainties, make comprehending text more complex.

As I mentioned before, there was a strain on my short-term memory when I discovered clauses that had participals and adjective phrases separated by many words from the word they modified. This happened at least five times as I tried to translate the passages:

Line 612 - Wealtheow...	Line 613 - mindful of courtesies = 4 words
Line 612 - Wealtheow...	Line 614 - attired in her gold = 7 words
Line 616 - king of the Danes.	Line 618 - beloved by his people = 6 words
Line 625 - she greeted...	Line 626 - wise in her words = 4 words
Line 628 - He accepted...	Line 630 - eager for battle = 10 words

I noticed that in Line 623 the ring-adorned queen was followed immediately by the post-position adjective phrase, excellent in virtues with no words separating it from the head word, queen. Another fact is that sometimes the adjective phrases are pre-positional such as ring-adorned queen in Line 623 and in Line 640, with the gold-adorned, high-born queen went to sit by her lord. However, there must be flexibility built in as to where a person could place these adjectivals. The alternatives give rise to uncertainties again in processing.

Not only adjectivals that stray away, but also appositives that stray away cause processing difficulties with an information overload and short-term memory overload. As a reader of modern English, I expect an appositive to follow closely the word it is apposition to (Dillon, 1978).

"Perceiving a phrase as appositive entails marking it as coreferential to some preceding phrase and recognizing that the function of the appositive is identical to that of the phrase it is appositive to. The problem of perceiving an appositive is primarily one of distinguishing it from a coordinated item in a series, for both are items set off from the preceding like item by a comma and it is not until the reader gets to the last item that he sees whether a conjunction is present or not. The reader encounters 'look-ahead' limitations: the decision to treat an item as coreferential to the preceding or not waits for structural information that may be delayed quite a while . . . Appositives may be delayed, and this fact makes problems for a simple, linear strategy." Most of the time the antecedent is the immediate preceding phrase of like type and most of the time I use the practical linear procedure for comprehending appositives. But in Beowulf, the appositives are delayed much of the time, and so I

needed to use semantic clues and a "wait to see" strategy since the structural clues were farther away than my "look-ahead" could reach. These facts and the inconsistency of the author in delaying the appositives were the source of some of my processing difficulties. The author does use undelayed appositives at times:

Line 623 she, the ring-adorned queen; Line 1170 my beloved lord, the dispenser of treasure; Line 1177 Herorat, the bright hall of rings is purged; but there were many instances of delayed appositives in my two passages.

Line 618 he...	Line 619 the victory-famed kind = 8 words
Line 628 He...	Line 629 battle-fierce warrior = 4 words
Line 631 Beowulf...	Line 631 the son of Ecgtheow = 1 word
Line 643 rejoicing...	Line 644 clamor = 3 words
Line 662 Heothgar...	Line 6 the Scylding king = 6 words
Line 1182 you...	Line 1183 oh, friend = 3 words

Delayed structure clues do make a difference in ease of processing. They did for me.

The searching I had to do to parse the sentences was another source of difficulty. I found myself operating on a lower level much of the time, just trying to perceive the sentences, specifying their propositional structure. I needed to identify the propositions and the phrases that functioned in them, matching logical subjects and objects with the predicates that relate them, and associating modifiers with the elements they modify. On the next level, comprehending, I had to identify the individuals referred to by the noun phrases and pronouns; the time and place of the actions represented in the sentence; possible motives, purposes, instruments, and consequences of the actions and so on, as Dillon points out in his introduction that all readers must do. I also had to try to work on

the highest level, interpreting, trying to make sense of what was going on in the poem, what the author intended, what he was getting at in terms of the themes and the meaning of the passages. The interpreting required using the conventions special to Beowulf. I did not have the conventions under control enough, so my interpreting was partial. Since I also did not have the language of Old English fully under control, I only partially perceived and comprehended the passages and when I did succeed in both or all three levels, it was with extreme difficulty at times, because of word order for the most part.

As a user of modern English, I expect the typical SV (O) pattern. When I read these passages, I found many atypical sentence patterns. These were atypical and non-conventional for me even if not for the Old English reader/hearer of Beowulf. Line 639 is an example of such an atypical sentence. Literally, I would translate it, the woman these words well pleased: (OSV). Line 640 has another atypical pattern: (VAS adv.) went the gold-adorned, gracious queen of the people by her lord to sit. Another, Line 653 is (VSO): greeted then one man (Hrothgar) the other man (Beowulf).

In Line 656 I found an (SOV) pattern: since I could lift arm and shield. Line 655-657 was a puzzler. Never I to any man before have entrusted since I arm and shield could lift the hall of the lanes except to you now then. Modern English requires an inverted word order pattern with initial never: Never have I entrusted the hall or (VSVO) but here I found SIO adv V (adv sub clause) O.

Line 1180 illustrates other word order problems: I my know gracious. Hrothulf that he then young men would rule in honor of you before then he, friend of the Scyldings this world should give up. The main clause is SVO

with 0 a noun clause, but finding the parts and separating them was a long, hard process.

I could go on and discuss other processing complications such as the amount of elegant variation used: the synonyms used that make a reader unsure whether this new word presented, usually a noun, is a synonym to the preceding noun or nouns introduced. Old English poetry makes great use of synonyms and elegant variation I discovered. Other problems were the long series of verbs, a short-term memory problem and information overload problem, and the heavy amount of deletion involved in the long list of compound verbs creating the parallel structure. The conciseness of this poem and my passages because of deletion, caused my processing problems too.

Processing the passages in Beowulf was very time-consuming at times very frustrating because I attacked it as a beginning reader attacks a first grade reading book, a beginning reader who is culturally deprived and who is only used to oral speech and not to formal written discourse with all its conventions that he meets in his new textbook. I needed to pay too much attention to visual information, I had too many uncertainties, and I didn't have enough nonvisual information; so therefore, I processed the assignment awkwardly, slowly, uncertainly, and at times partially. Still, I did process it and I did enjoy the assignment and I am happy for the experience. Poor processors do become good processors in time, given time and the correct strategies.

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Appendix

word wæron wynsume. Eode Wealhþēow forð,
cwēn Hrōðgāres cynna gemyndig;
grētte gold-hroden guman on healle,
ond þā frēolīc wīf ful gesealde
ǣrest Ēast-Dena ēþel-wearde;
bæd hine blīðne æt þǣre bēor-þege,
lēodum lēofne; hē on lust geþeah
symbel ond sele-ful sige-rōf kyning.
Ymb-ēode þā Healdes Helminga
duguþe ond geogoþe dǣl æghwylcne
sinc-fato sealde oþþæt sæl ālamp,
þæt hīo Bēowulfe, bēag-hroden cwēn
mōde gemunge medo-ful ætbær;
grētte Gēata lēod, Gode þancode
wīs-fæst wōrdum, þæs ðe hīo wille gelamp,
þæt hēo on ænigne eorl gelȳfde
fyrena frōfre. Hē þæt ful geþeah,
wæl-rēow wiga, æt Wealhþēon,
ond þā gyddode gūþe gefȳsed;
Bēowulf maþelode, bearn Ecgþēowes:
"Ic þæt hogode, þā ic on holm gestāh,
sæ-bāt gesæt mid mīnra secga gedriht,
þæt ic ānunga ēowra lēoda
willan geworhte, oþðe on wæl crunge,
fēond-grāpum fæst. Ic gefremman sceal
eorlīc ellen, oþðe ende-dæg
on þisse meodu-healle mīnne gebīdan."
Đām wīfe þā word wēl līcodon,

gilp-cwide Gēates; ēode gold-hroden
trēolicu folc-cwēn tō hire frēan sittan.
Þā wæs eft swā ær inne on healle
þrȳð-word sprecen, ðēod on sælum,
sige-folca swēg, oþþæt semninga
sunu Healfdenes sēcean wolde
æfen-ræste; wiste þæm āhlæcan
tō þæm hēah-sele hilde geþinged,
siððan hīe sunnan lēoht gesēon meahton,
oþ ðe nīpende niht ofer ealle,
scadu-helma gesceapu scrīðan cwōman,
wan under wolcnum. Werod eall ārās.
[Ge]grētte þā guma ōþerne,
Hrōðgār Bēowulf, ond him hæl ābēad,
wīn-ærnes geweald, ond þæt word ācwæð:
"Nǣfre ic ænegum men ær ālȳfde,
siþðan ic hond ond rond hebban mihte,
ðrȳþ-ærn Dena būton þē nū ðā.
Hafa nū ond geheald hūsa sēlest,
gemyne mæro, mægen-ellen cȳð,
waca wið wrāþum! Ne bið þē wilna gād
gif þū þæt ellen-weorc aldre gedīgest."
X Ðā him Hrōþgār gewāt mid his hæleþa gedryht,
eodur Scyldinga ūt of healle;
wolde wīg-fruma Wealhþēo sēcan,
cwēn tō gebeddan. Hæfde Kyning-wuldor
Grendle tōgēanes, swā guman gefrungon,
sele-weard āseted; sundor-nytte behēold
ymb aldor Dena, eoton-weard' ābēad.
Hūru Gēata lēod georne truwode
mōdgan mægnes, and Metodes hyldo.

III. ār-fæst æt ecga gelācum. Spræc ðā ides Scyldinga:
"Onfōh þissum fulle, frēo-drihten mīn,
sinces brytta; þū on sælum wes,
gold-wine gumena, ond tō Gēatum spræc
mildum wordum, swā sceal man dōn;
bēo wið Gēatas glæd, geofena gemyndig,
nēan ond feorran þū nū hafast,
mē man sægde, þæt þū ðē for-sunu wolde
here-ri[n]c habban. Heorot is gefælsod
bēah-sele beorhta; brūc, þenden þū mōte,
manigra mēdo, ond þīnum māgum læf
folc ond rīce, þonne ðū forð scyle,
metodsceaft sēon. Ic mīnne can
glædne Hrōþulf, þæt hē þā geogoðe wile
ārum healdan, gyf þū ær þonne hē,
wine Scildinga, worold oflætest;
wēne ic þæt hē mid gōde gyldan wille
uncran eaferan, gif hē þæt eal gemon,
hwæt wit tō willan ond tō worð-myndum
umbor-wesendum ær ārna gefremedon."

S V adverb O

S V O